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NEWS RELEASE

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Idaho Restaurateurs Call Smoking Ban a Success

It's been eight months since Senator Brent Hill's bill banning smoking in restaurants took effect, making Idaho one of 11 states to designate restaurants as smoke free. While many opponents predicted doom and gloom for Idaho eating and drinking establishments, testimonials from restaurateurs and saloonkeepers may indicate otherwise.

"Going smoke free hasn't been bad for business at all," says Mark Carringer, who owns Moon's Kitchen Café in Boise with his wife, Kali. "My gut feeling is that going smoke free – which we were planning on doing anyway – has increased our receipts by 3-4 percent."

Mary Merritt, owner of Merritt's Country Café in Boise, agrees. "We haven't lost any customers because we had to go smoke free," she says. "With the way the economy is, we're doing pretty good and look at the smoking ban as a positive thing." In fact, Merritt says it allowed her restaurant to go smoke free without angering patrons. "We couldn't have gone smoke free on our own," she says. "We would have made a lot of our customers mad."

Other Idaho restaurateurs risked alienating patrons by going smoke free before the ban, but found it didn't hurt their businesses either. The Coeur d'Alene café Little Seattle has been smoke free since Michele Schafer purchased it in April 2004. She says the only adverse impact on her business was one banquet. "A gentleman who called to reserve our meeting room asked if we allowed smoking in it," Schafer says, "but I had to turn him away because he said one of the guys could never go that long without a cigarette."

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The Sandpiper restaurant in Idaho Falls went smoke free well before the new law – in January 2002 – and was the first restaurant in town to do so. “Overall, going smoke free has been beneficial,” says manager Ron Obendorf. “It’s cost us \$500 to \$1,000 per week in bar receipts, but the increase in diners has more than made up for it. We’ve been up by 10,000 dinners every year since we went smoke free.” Plus he says cleaning costs have dropped considerably – a benefit virtually all restaurants experience after smoking is banned.

Even restaurants that have taken a significant hit to the bottom line and were outspoken against the smoking ban have changed their tune. “It’s killed our bar business,” says Marian Schreier, who owns the Stagecoach Inn in Garden City with her twin sister, Mary Thomas. “But neither of us smoke, so personally it’s been heaven, plus we’ve received a lot of positive feedback from our customers.” Schreier says although their food business has increased, it hasn’t made up for the loss on the bar side. Nevertheless, she’s glad they had to ban smoking. “I would never have said it before,” she says, “but it’s fantastic.”

Kevin Settles, owner of Bardenay Restaurant & Distillery in Boise and Eagle, had a similar experience. Like Schreier, Settles was a vocal adversary of the smoking ban and says the new law had a definite negative impact on the bottom line – 10 percent by his estimation. “It’s been eight months now and we’re finally overcoming it,” he says, adding that since December his business has returned to growth mode. “It’s been nice without the smoke,” admits Settles. “But I would like the state legislature to level the playing field and extend the ban to all indoor areas.”

According to Mary Therese MacConnell, state advocacy director for the American Heart Association, the passage of clean indoor air bills usually don’t result in an economic loss for businesses. “In fact, some studies show an increase for businesses,” she says. In addition, MacConnell says a 2003 survey in three Idaho cities found 76 percent of people favored “a ban on smoking in indoor public places, including workplaces and restaurants.”

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The clean indoor air bill also may have a very positive impact on public health. “Idaho spends \$294 million annually in health care costs directly related to tobacco use – \$77 million of which is covered by the state Medicaid program through taxpayer dollars,” says Jack Miller, manager of the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare’s Tobacco Prevention and Control Program. “Every Idaho household pays \$519 in state and federal taxes to cover smoking-caused government expenses, and smoking-caused productivity losses cost state businesses \$292 million annually.”

What is even more alarming is the deaths tobacco-related illnesses cause. “It’s tragic, but more than 1,500 Idaho adults die each year from smoking,” he adds. “And an additional 150-260 adults, children, and babies die each year from secondhand smoke and smoking during pregnancy.”

For the state’s restaurant workers, the clean indoor air law has literally been a breath of fresh air. Restaurant workers have almost twice the risk of lung cancer than people in other occupations due to on-the-job exposure to cigarette smoke. “In many cases they inhale the equivalent of two packs of unfiltered cigarettes a day,” Miller says. “And waitresses are two-and-a-half times more likely to die from heart disease as women in other occupations.”

While it may be too soon to gauge how effective the state’s clean indoor air bill will be in curbing diseases and the expenses associated with it, MacConnell says Idahoans don’t have to look too far for concrete evidence that clean indoor air regulations work. “When Helena, Montana, passed a 100-percent-smoke-free law, the number of admissions to its hospital emergency room for heart attacks decreased by 60 percent,” she says. “And in at least two other studies it’s been shown that the number of heart attacks goes down by about 50 percent when a community institutes a smoking ban. And that’s just incidences of heart attacks – we’re not even talking about lung cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, or the myriad other afflictions caused and exacerbated by cigarette smoke.”

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(Editors: For more information about the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare’s tobacco cessation and prevention efforts, please contact Jack Miller at (208) 334-4936.)